

Excerpt from Chapter 2 -- The Tenets of Appreciative Inquiry (pages 27-39) in *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force, 2nd Edition*. (2020). Victoria, BC: Friesen Press.

Methodology

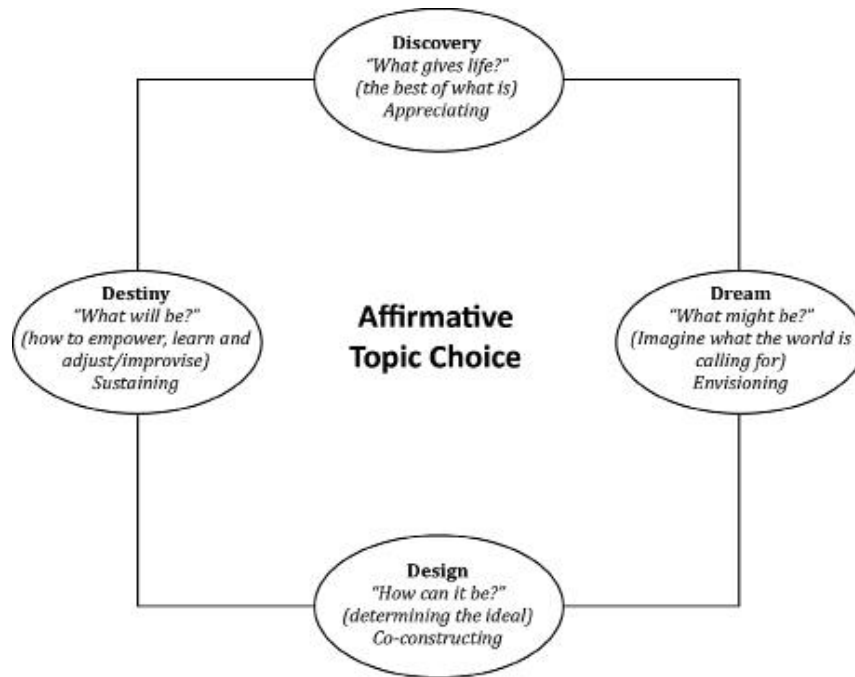
There are many ways to engage in Appreciative Inquiry, including specific events of anywhere from a few hours to several days; inquiries that include data gathering via interviews and focus groups; training a core team to do interviews and data analysis; and combining AI with other methodologies. All AI frameworks provide opportunities for people to engage in storytelling, dialogue with others, and opportunities to collaboratively co-create their futures. Because of the engaging and collaborative nature of AI, what occurs through the inquiry is emergent. The basic framework is an emergent design with minimal structure, to allow the wisdom of the people involved to surface in order to co-create their future together. *Emergent design* means that the process follows the energy of the group and flexes and evolves as the process continues. For example, in Bow Valley College's large strategic planning process, the opportunity for input, change, and innovation was left open until the very last approval moment. This was done to ensure that energy continued to spark innovation through the process. The emergent design can cause the steps in the process to flex, the amount and quality of input to change as it follows the energy of the process.

The most common AI model is the 4-D cycle (Cooperrider and others, 2003) and built from that are the 5-D model and the "five generic processes" (Watkins and others, 2011). There are many other models, including SOAR— Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009) — for strategic planning (see Chapter Eight). AI practitioners create variations of the models to adapt them to particular contexts and the language of those contexts. In this section we focus on the 4-D cycle and the five generic processes and how they apply in higher education. Throughout the book we illustrate how to use these for particular purposes.

The 4-D Cycle in Appreciative Inquiry

The 4-D cycle is based on the AI paradigm shown in Table 2.1. *Discovery* is the first step of "appreciating, valuing the best of what is" (Cooperrider and others, 2003, p. 15) and engages people through interviews, storytelling, and sharing emergent themes. *Dream* is the second step of "envisioning what might be" (Cooperrider, p. 15) and engages groups in creating visual and word images for their ideal futures. *Design* is the third step of "dialoguing what should be" (Cooperrider, p. 15), and participants co-construct their ideal futures by coming up with strategies to get there. *Destiny* is the last step of "innovating what will be" and continues on after an AI event. People find ways to sustain the changes they have co-constructed and to co-create more, celebrating successes along the way. Sometimes this final D is called *Delivery* or *Deliver* or just *Do It!* The key is that all these steps are focused around the affirmative topic that is chosen at the beginning of the process and focused on throughout the inquiry. Figure 2.1 depicts the 4-D cycle.

Figure 2.1. Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle



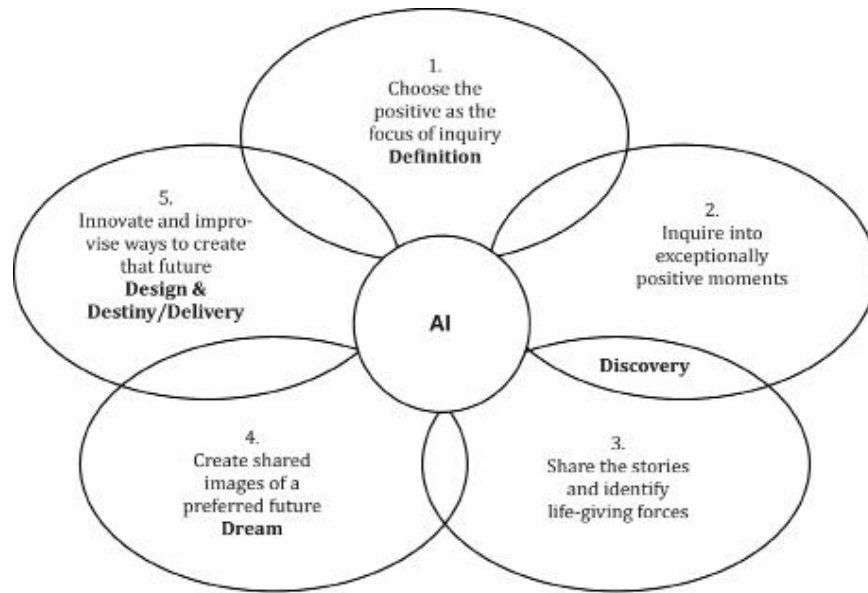
Source: Cooperrider and others (2003), p. 5.

Five Generic Processes of AI

The five generic processes of AI (Watkins & Mohr, 2001) are a very practical way to move through the phases of AI; the five steps take each of the 4-Ds into account and include a fifth D, *Definition*, to become a 5-D model. The Definition D emphasizes the importance of taking the time needed to develop the topic that will fit the purpose of the inquiry and engage everyone involved. We illustrate the use of the five generic processes of AI or 5-D model in various sections of the book, illustrating how it can be applied in multiple processes.

DEFINITION. Step 1, “Choose the positive as the focus of the inquiry” (Mohr & Watkins, 2002, p. 5), is the most important one because it guides the inquiry all the way through. In this Definition step, by choosing to focus on the positive, the problems are reframed into what is wanted, the affirmative topic — that is, what is working well already — the strengths and successes. AI recognizes the power of grounding the organizational preferred future in the best of what already is. The power comes through the storytelling of the best of what is and, through that, people’s belief in their ability to make positive change and build an even better future together. AI suggests that what is wanted already exists to some extent. When the purpose is large, such as strategic planning, it’s best to have a very broad topic

Figure 2.2. Five Generic Processes of Appreciative Inquiry



Source: Mohr and Watkins (2002), p. 5.

such as “the institution at its best.” Narrow topics are useful when the purpose is more specific, for example, in a department that is having communication problems and conflict, these issues could be reframed to the topic “communicating at our best” or “working highly effectively with conflict.” The serious issues are reframed into what is wanted. Some groups start with the general Appreciative Inquiry “being at our best” to determine their positive topics for inquiry rather than starting with issues and reframing them. The determination of topics is dependent on the context and purpose for the inquiry. In situations where there are a lot of issues, it is essential for the participants to feel heard by airing their issues before focusing on the positive and reframing to what they want. AI practitioners need to be sensitive to the needs of the organization and people that they are working with to facilitate the choices at each step of the inquiry.

Sometimes there is one clear issue. For example, Jeanie facilitated a session at a national conference of college and university financial aid administrators. The organizing committee met with Jeanie to plan the AI. They started by identifying the big issue as 20 percent of students defaulting on their loans. They wanted to fix that problem. So Jeanie suggested that if 20 percent defaulted, then 80 percent paid back their loans and asked the planners what they thought were the reasons those 80 percent were successful. After much discussion, they agreed that the key to success was student engagement with the financial aid process and the active role financial aid offices took in promoting student engagement. So the affirmative topic agreed upon was “promoting student engagement.” Through the Appreciative Inquiry, they discovered ways that they were helping students, shared these ideas, envisioned more possibilities, and designed strategies to make them happen.

DISCOVERY. Discovery encompasses two steps of the five generic processes: Step 2 — Inquire into exceptionally positive moments, and Step 3 — Share the stories and identify life-giving forces (Mohr & Watkins, 2002, p. 5).

Once the topic is defined, then the Discovery process starts, with developing the interview questions. We use and adapt the Mohr and Watkins’ (2002) generic interview guide that explores the best of what was and is through stories, values, core life-giving factors, and wishes for the future. The generic questions work

well as a base for a particular application and organization and can be easily adapted to meet the needs of higher education settings:

- *Best experience.* Tell me a story about the best times that you have had with your organization (team, family, community, network, or other group). Looking at your entire experience, recall a time when you felt most alive or most excited about your involvement. What made it an exciting experience? Who else was involved? Describe the event in detail.
- *Values.* What are the things you value about yourself, your work, and your organization?
 - ☐ *Yourself.* Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself — as a human being, friend, parent, citizen, and so on?
 - ☐ *Your work.* When you are feeling best about work, what do you value about it?
 - ☐ *Your organization.* What is it about your organization (team, family, community, network, or other group) that you value? What is the single most important thing that your organization has contributed to your life?
- *Core life-giving factor.* What do you think is the core value or factor that allows the organization to pull through during difficult times? If this core value or factor did not exist, how would that make your organization totally different than it currently is?
- *Three wishes.* If you had three wishes for this organization, what would they be? (Mohr & Watkins, 2002, p. 6).

These questions can be easily modified based on the affirmative topic and the specific organization. Questions can be added if there is time and deleted if time is limited. Here are the questions developed around the topic of “promoting student engagement” for the college and university financial aid administrators in the example noted previously:

- *Best experience.* Think about the best times that you have had working as a financial aid administrator, especially when working with students who were engaged in and responsible for their student loan process. Recall a time when this process worked really well. Tell me a story about that time. How did you contribute to the process? What did the student do? Who else was involved? What made it successful and rewarding? Describe the event in detail.
- *Values.* What do you value about yourself and your work as a financial aid administrator?
- *Three wishes.* If you had three wishes for student engagement in financial aid processes, what would they be? (Modified from Mohr & Watkins, 2002)

These questions are used in Step 2 of the five generic processes to “inquire into exceptionally positive moments.” In this part of Discovery, people pair up to interview each other using the questions that they have developed based on the definition of the affirmative topic. The essential question is the first one: the best experience. It is the one that strongly brings in the narrative — it is a story that is to be elicited, not a generalized list of what makes the experience best. Those generalizations come later, when themes are drawn out of the stories. The questions flow from the past experiences to looking inward at values and life-giving factors to moving toward the future through expressing wishes. We examine storytelling and interviewing further in Chapter Seven.

After the interviews, the pairs join other pairs to form groups of four to eight. These groups engage in Step 3 of the five generic processes of AI. They “share the stories and identify life-giving forces” (Mohr & Watkins, 2002, p. 5). In these groups, the interviewers share highlights of what they heard from the interviewees; then the groups identify themes from the interviews. If there is more than one group, each group collaboratively selects about five themes to share with the rest of the groups. From considering all the themes, each group selects one theme or cluster of themes to use in the next step of the AI, the Dream. If time is limited, the selection of themes to take into the Dream step is done in the individual groups rather than sharing with the whole. All the themes can be captured and collected as data that inform the preferred future.

DREAM. In Step 4 of the five generic processes, the Dream, the groups “create shared images of a preferred future” (Mohr & Watkins, 2002, 5). Guided by a Discovery theme or cluster of themes, the groups come up with two kinds of images for their preferred futures: a visual image and a word image. The visual image can be a diagram on a flip chart, a skit, song, body sculpture, clay model, or other form. Participants use their imaginations to symbolically create an image for the future based on their theme. Their metaphorical image then inspires the creation of their word image. The word image or provocative proposition is like a vision statement. It provokes action. It is written in the present tense because it’s grounded in what is already working. For example, the Dalhousie University Faculty of Dentistry engaged in a two-day AI into “Dalhousie University— Faculty of Dentistry at its best” to launch their academic planning with about sixty faculty, staff, administrators, and students. They came up with some wonderful visual images, including a fun skit of student graduation, and provocative propositions that then became part of their strategic vision for their academic plan. The final academic plan document, the Strategic Vision 2011–2021, included their mission, vision, strategic goals, and guiding principles. The provocative propositions became part of the plan, either as guiding principles or strategic goals, along with others that arose during the plan development process. For example, one of their provocative propositions, “We provide a welcoming and supportive environment that encourages faculty and staff retention,” translated and expanded into one of their six strategic goals with its particular subgoals.

Goal D: Environment

Provide a Welcoming and Supportive Environment

- Provide facilities that optimize the quality of oral health education, research, and patient care.
- Engage students, faculty, and staff in a manner that encourages retention, satisfaction, and personal growth.
- Evoke in our students, faculty, staff, and alumni their innate enthusiasm for discovery, new knowledge creation, curiosity about best practices, and social responsibility.

Source: Dalhousie University Faculty of Dentistry (2011).

Another of the original provocative propositions, “We innovate and collaborate to ensure a balanced student-centered learning environment,” became one of the ten guiding principles in the Strategic Vision document, which all began with “Together we . . .” and followed with “innovate and collaborate to ensure a balanced student-centered learning environment, grounded in the best available research and technology.”

DESIGN AND DESTINY/DELIVERY. These images of the preferred future created in Step 4 are the basis for Step 5 of the five generic processes, Design and Destiny/Delivery, through which the groups “innovate ways to create that future” (Mohr & Watkins, 2002). In Part One of Step 5, Design, the key question is “How are we going to make this preferred future happen?” Design is about creating an individual and/or collective intention and action plan. This is a very concrete and outcomes-based part of Appreciative Inquiry. These Design plans can be created in various ways depending on the time available, the context, and the purpose. For example, groups could discuss strategies for making their provocative propositions a reality and create a plan together. Another example is the groups using a planning template that could include such questions as:

- What actions are you proposing to make the preferred future happen?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What resources are required?
- What are the timelines?
- What can groups and/or individuals offer and commit to?

- The format of the plan is driven by the purpose of the process. For example, if the process is about team building, the Design might identify key agreements for working together effectively. If the process is academic planning, the Design will reflect the goals and outcomes in the format required by the institution.

If there isn't time in the AI session for groups to create action plans, the provocative propositions can go forward to working group sessions that design the details of the next steps. In some large all-college staff sessions with limited time frames, we have had the groups discuss Design and then reflect and write down personal commitments to take forward. For example, Quinsigamond Community College's all-staff engagement used AI to create a shared vision for one of their strategic goals, "Students first." After creating images and provocative propositions for their preferred future, in the Design phase the small groups discussed ways to make it happen. Then each person wrote down responses to "What can you do to make the preferred future happen?" The answers to this question were intentions for moving forward and included commitments, offers and requests (Mohr & Watkins, 2002, p. 9). Commitments are actions each can do; offers are resources given to others; and requests are needs that others can provide. These 450 people then stood and simultaneously read aloud what they had written. It was a way to put this energy for creating their future into the room. And it was private, because nobody could hear each other. It was profound, a whole group simultaneously stating intentions. They all took their written intentions with them in order to do personal follow-up on commitments, offers, and requests.

From the Design step, the intention and action plans, both individual and collective, go forward to Part Two of Step 5, that is, the Destiny/Delivery phase. This phase is making the Designs happen by delivering on the intention and action plans. Delivery is very practical and means implementing the strategies and actions. Some people call this the "Do It" phase. Destiny is another way of describing the last D. Destiny means living the ongoing creation of the future and recognizes that as plans are implemented there is a continual need to rediscover, redream, redesign as change happens, a continued emergent design for the preferred future. Futures are continually being created, and the key to sustaining the AI energy is to engage in ongoing learning, improvising, celebrating, and practicing the AI principles daily (Kelm, 2005; Stavros & Torres, 2005), which we describe in other sections of the book.

In higher education institutions, Destiny often involves using AI in many ways and using it with other strengths-based strategies. For example, Northern Essex Community College used AI to do their strategic plan in 2007 for 2008–2011, after which they had nine people trained to be AI facilitators. These people then facilitated a variety of AI sessions, engaged in the actions to live the preferred future of the plan, and became part of the planning group for the next version of the strategic plan (2012–2015). This group affirmatively chose to continue to use AI in their planning and began by doing an AI into highly effective planning. One of the first actions from this was to celebrate the 2008–2011 plan with two hundred faculty, staff, and administrators. During this celebration, participants used AI interviews and small-group discussions to share stories of experiences with the core values and the strategic plan in action; to suggest new strategic directions, and to express their wishes for the college. We expand upon this example in Chapter Eight, in which we discuss planning.

Doing AI

The 5-Ds and the five generic AI processes are very practical ways to engage in the methodology of AI to generate and build futures on what is working well already. The structure of the Ds creates a container for groups to work through steps to generate positive futures. This structure is a minimal flexible structure that allows for other processes within it. It is a structure that can be trusted to create the opportunity for creativity, innovation, and dialogue to emerge throughout. It is an emergent design, a process that evolves as people engage together. AI is like any research or inquiry in that what arises and evolves through the process is what is meaningful to the people who are part of the process. And, sometimes beginning to use AI can be through just starting with Discovery questions to engage a group, as in the example from Byrad Yyellend at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar.

Kicking Off a Semester with AI

We begin each month at our campus with a meeting of all faculty and administrative personnel. These meetings are run by our dean and typically involve information sharing. I had asked for twenty minutes in the January meeting to add something new to the format, a discussion about teaching. Just prior to this meeting I took the Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training, and this inspired me to shift my focus to a more inclusive (our administrative personnel do not teach) process that would kick the semester off on a positive note. I modified the Generic Interview Guide to ask about personal values and a peak experience during one's time at our institution, printed off enough copies for everyone, and placed one on the seat of each chair before the meeting. As people arrived they picked up the paper and began to read, which saved some of my introduction time.

Time was tight, so all I did was say that we've all had wonderful experiences at our institution and it would be great to begin the semester by taking a few moments to celebrate these experiences. I asked everyone to pair up and take turns being the interviewer and interviewee. I called "time" at five minutes, so they could switch roles and at ten minutes to conclude. Participants were invited to leave their papers behind for collection, and the dean is preparing a presentation of their comments. We finished within the allotted time.

The exercise created a tremendous buzz of energy, and many people later told me they had thoroughly enjoyed the exercise. They felt good beginning the semester in such a positive manner. One team leader asked if I could do a more in-depth session with the members of her department, and we are now planning a session for her.